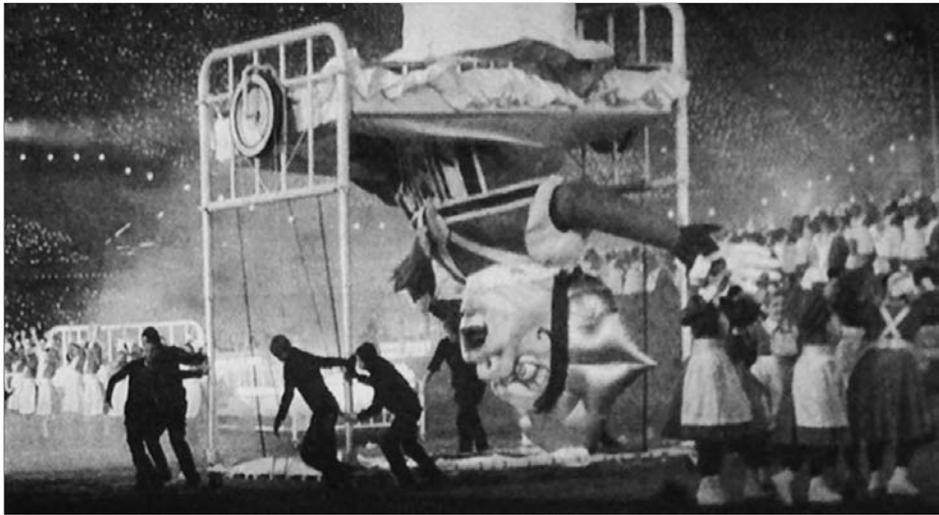


“A cloud of 21st-century consciousness”



By Steve Hanson

“It’s so exotic, so homemade.” Paul Scofield narrating Patrick Keiller’s film “London”. I couldn’t stop myself from watching the Olympic opening ceremony. I predicted hours of torture as I tried to stifle my discomfort, but actually, the event was more interesting than I expected.

Essentially, director Danny Boyle attempted a representation of Britain from the industrial revolution on up, via a romanticised, feudal pastoral scene, an unnatural “zero moment”. Phallic chimneys split the ground, replacing the phallic maypoles and jingoistic Oak tree, and planted the “dark satanic mills” of Blake, whose ‘Jerusalem’ was sung. Brunel made a speech in his big sideburns, and the Olympic rings were forged. All of this was presented as “natural”, but the seams were showing occasionally, via which a critical entry could be made. You had to look carefully for these joins though, because they were often absences, places where the cultural texture had been folded back under, then stitched into place.

In a recent documentary, Iain Sinclair and Andrew Kotting describe the zone around the Olympic Park as a “cloud of 21st-century consciousness”. Sinclair relates the Blake quote, “human thought is crush’d beneath the iron hand of power”, to the capitalist regeneration attempt around and through the Olympic site, which he and many others think is crazy, even on its own terms. Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’ is anti-capitalist in many ways, but its employment in the ceremony wasn’t simply hypocritical, it gave it a double-bind-like quality, intentionally or otherwise. The double-bind, Derrida once explained, operates like the term “pharmakon”, which means both medicine and poison.

More obviously, this celebration of a Britain “forged” in the industrial revolution masked the politicised attacks on industrialism by certain quarters of British society: “The City” has long militated against industry in the rest of the country, long before Thatcher even, a figure who lurked behind the scenery of the opening ceremony. Thatcher was the real Child Catcher here, not the one raised mythically from Mary Poppins during the ceremony; Iain Sinclair thinks of her quite literally as a witch.

Thatcher could also be glimpsed in the splitting of the event in two, narrative-wise: when the identikit Beatles arrived, in Sergeant Pepper costumes, erroneously ahead of the Empire Windrush, no bell was rung, but a switch had been thrown; we went from a Britain accounted for in terms of its manufacturing economy, which replaced rural feudalism, to a Britain accounted for almost entirely in terms of its cultural consumption. We had been symbolically shifted from “the base”, to “the superstructure”, to use the Marxist terminology, like a train going through a set of points. This is correct in one sense, if we think about the way working lives and experiences in Britain have changed, the switch is real, but it is interesting to think about in relation to the Empire Windrush: inward migration was represented, but not the practices of offshoring labour; after the Windrush and the Yellow Submarines we should have seen container drivers, meandering in a patternless weave across the space.

This historical switch was thrown by Thatcher, and prosecuted through advocacy such as the Ridley Report, the ramifications of which are still live. But I also wondered what other nations thought of this, as they watched the opening ceremony, as this narrative of two halves — producers and consumers — reproduced an islander’s view of

Britain, rather than an outward-looking one.

There were other moments where the seams showed: for instance, there were two mourning pauses, one for the World Wars and one for 7/7, which tends to fold the events into each other. There was more than a trace of 1950s “blitz” aesthetic in the ceremony already, which risked reinforcing the latent idea that what happens in Afghanistan and Iraq are collapsible into the fight against fascism and the capitalist war of 1914-18. It all gets resolved at the symbolic level of a big Poppy and a Help For Heroes bumper sticker.

There was much John Bullish trumpeting about the volunteers too, who performed Boyle’s “vision” for free. One pundit claimed that these people gave the lie to the idea that no-one will do anything in Britain unless we pay them “shedloads” of money. Well, that’s untrue, real wages for ordinary jobs have been in decline for years, but people still work them.

The elitism of England was reproduced in the £1600 or £2012 ticket price, entitling spectators to watch unpaid performers. How perfectly reflective of 2012 England, and here we really did have the “superstructure” properly reflecting “the base”, as Walter Benjamin urged us to describe it.

This is a great metaphor for the British cultural industries too, which a commentator explained was one of Britain’s biggest exports, exports powered by the narcissism which propels people into unpaid labour, both in this spectacle, and in “the media” industries more generally.

We’re always told that the great thing about capitalism is choice, Coke or Pepsi, and affordability, and that all this is delivered by competition. Yet here was “choice” as fait accompli, Coke not Pepsi, literally, and this is before we discuss whether Coke or Pepsi was ever a choice in the first place.

Here also was “competition”, the unpaid before ludicrously expensive ticket holders and corporate boxes, in an assemblage put together via a “competition” for franchise, which took place thousands of feet above street level, but nonetheless sent the cops in when the terms of its agreement were broken on those streets. Just cast your mind back to the August 2011 riots, here, in poetic, assemblage-form, is what happened to the social contract, what replaced it in fact.

The “brand policing” — which usually only means the application of aesthetic rules — was literal policing here. The “free” in free market seemed to have been replaced by a kind of cultural Stalinism — which is perhaps over-stating the matter; nobody, as far as I’m aware, was asked to rise early for the electric mattress and fingernail spa — but the irony was clear. “Competition”, to which the words “liberty”, “freedom” and “progress” are always attached, has always been the chilling process of watching bigger fish watching you, with their giant, dead eyes, waiting to open their cold-blooded jaws. Competition isn’t a jolly wheeze of a running race for all, with fair handicaps, all British and sportsmanlike what-what, something also coded into the opening ceremony.

All the exclusions here act as metaphors: the system cannot maintain itself without those outside, they are the economically necessary who are always described as unnecessary, although their describing as such is necessary for those in power. Anyone who has worked for a reasonable amount of time in any institution — public or private — will know that the cultural orders there are never straightforward hierarchies of ability. And this, all of this, was coded into the Olympic opening, although it was nec-

essary to turn its cultural fabric inside-out at this point, to find the truth of its construction; competitions, “meritocracies”, don’t single out the able individual for special treatment, they single out the masses who are “not able” for “special treatment”, and often this has little to do with ability, because under capitalism “the able” simply means those who happen to be in the always very much less than full employment.

But the ceremony wasn’t uncritical, or only unconsciously critical: NHS beds were crawled over by monsters at one point, and this made the event partly nationalistic and partly critical, again, it was a double bind. You could feel the tears welling up, the affect was strong, but I would argue that this affect strongly risks re-coursing into thin nationalism.

Danny Boyle’s selection as director also illuminated the shifting of cultural capital in Britain, and the inclusion of the countercultural in this was telling. A bit of the soundtrack flashed up like the new national anthem, and I was thinking, “where do I know this from?” It was a rehashed fragment of “Two Months Off” by Underworld, who put the music together, which ten years ago you might have heard coming down from a pill, but here it played like “Ode To Joy”.

POPULAR CULTURE

I saw the sociologist Mike Savage feed back the results of the Great British Class Survey recently, and he explained how our cultural capital references have shifted towards popular cultural ones, away from high cultural “elitism”.

Of course, popular culture, since its major rise in the 1960s, fragmented the “us and them” situation of the Edwardian era. But in another sense entirely, the idea that the counterculture has “won” by entering the canon is also misguided, because, for instance, the romantics were already “countercultural”, Blake certainly.

But it is clear that the gap between protest culture and cultural capital has been effectively shut down in 2012, by the nanosecond of reflection time between the receive-and-send of interactive communication, and the corresponding speed-up of purchasing and cultural redundancy. Both “radical” and “mainstream” were winking out of existence via these processes, this is a cultural Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. In essence, the a-central hell of the industrial revolution Boyle depicted simply turned into the a-central hell of our consumer landscapes, when the switch was thrown from the “base” industrial narrative to the “superstructural”, pop-cultural one. We were simply put into different, but equally alienating, evaporating spaces.

In fact, the whole thing resembled everyday life in many ways, like a train station or an airport, with its vast scale and confusing morass of people, nonetheless roughly choreographed, with different, symbolically-coded groups rushing one way or another. If we add the glib bidding for the Olympic franchise and its deeply cynical policing to this “gesamtkunstwerk”, we are actually left with a very large critical ensemble, which begins to look like “reality” itself: if we think about the Greek libation, it was for “the gods”, but birds and other animals actually took the offerings away. In this ceremony they took your Pepsi away and airbrushed any un-franchised Olympic rings from the city, but then others can come along, like me, and read the remaining assemblage like a jewel, turning it over in different lights.

Put simply, it was useful. It was a pre-winter underlining of who we are, if one accepts that “who we are” is edited, slurred, exclusive, even patronising, but most certainly exotic and homemade. Walter Benjamin’s interest in the Paris arcades was to show us the dreaming life of the masses in the nineteenth century, to wake us into the twentieth, and therefore we might wake to our own era via a similar study. Benjamin describes the “dialectical images”, rescued from the rubbish of his own era. On one level, it was possible to get near to what Benjamin urged us to do via the Olympic ceremony, but it was a mass spectacle, and to fully do what Benjamin asked we would have to locate a receding, half-forgotten zone. But it is clear to me that much can be mined from big spectacles such as this one.

The point for me though is not necessarily to read the Olympic opening ceremony all the way through, and certainly not the Arcades Project, but to ask, “what can we do to wake us in the twenty-first century and shake the twentieth century sleep from our eyes?” But perhaps it will be the lack of spectacles such as these, rather than their reading, which will eventually do the awakening. I’m relieved that the enormous outpouring of collective hysteria called “The Olympics” only lasts until 12 August. At which point, I assume, the bread and circuses will all be used up, and we will have to account for our true circumstances, in the cold light of an on-coming winter. I can’t wait, frankly. In the meantime, I’m tuned into Radio 3 and may never re-emerge.

